

Alexandra Bachzetsis: The fluid limits between “(her)self” and the “other”

Alexandra Bachzetsis, a Greek performer and choreographer widely known in the European scene but for the time being a stranger in the Greek scene, presented in Radio Athènes her piece *Private: Wear a mask when you talk to me*, a study on the performativity of the (female) gender, the fluid limits of the self and the process of depersonalization through constant disguises.

The performance was accessible to the public both to the informed spectators that came on purpose and to those who passed by and stood bewildered. It was an exploration of the multiple images of “femininity”, the way in which the borders of the “self” are disrupted or imposed through stereotypical roles. Gender roles and stereotypes are far from being diminished. Woman is becoming more and more the focal point of the political and social agenda but paradoxically the gap between the institutional representation of Woman and the image that emerges from her bodily and embodied experiences continues to grow. Bachzetsis is accurate in recognizing this contradiction and she opts for a “transcendence” that is “materialized” through flesh. It is embodied thus reinforcing the complex and non-uniform reception of the nature of the subject.

The choreographer commences from the acceptance that “women are the object of gaze” in order to represent a relation to herself mainly grounded in the promise of the (male) desire that she is called to incarnate. This deliberate submission to the supremacy of the gaze – along with the sense that the woman is constantly being watched as an image of herself – is conveyed through the process of applying make-up: the performer is putting on make-up with her back turned on the audience but we watch the idol of herself through a mirror. Correspondingly, our own gaze is diffused through the looking glass, it evades or it momentarily meets her gaze. The reduplication of this action – through the lacanian pattern “I see myself being seen” – serves to disclose the mechanism through which the female subject “becomes a woman”, it is rendered passive and it is delivered to the gaze as an object of desire.

Accordingly, the performer treats the space in which she is situated as an extension of her bodily self; it is an impersonal room, without any objects – apart from the performer’s own accessories – a transitional space on the borderline between the private and the public sphere. Only a few spectators are inside, most of us stand outside as onlookers, enjoying the riskless proximity that the window-glass of the venue is offering us. We stand close but the framing casts us in the role of the voyeur: the prey always remains within the focal range of our gaze; it is framed, lit, and available. As a living exhibit she will remain there, in the strictly delimited space of the room, protected and simultaneously delivered to the voracious gazes of the spectators. The room encloses the experience of both the expansion and the limitation of her subjectivity: she is the lady of the space and the object of observation.

When she wears a vinyl one-piece dress she transmutes into a female stud (dominatrix) converting the pleasure of submission into a female value. She sways her hips flashily and surrenders to what others desire her to be. It goes without saying that once again an idol of masculinity is presented; a role that is “given” to her, or one that she adopts in-/voluntarily thus supporting the way in which the phallogocentric system functions: by constituting sets of “underestimated others”, negative aspects of the gender difference. But the performer undermines the very system that constructs the various expressions of herself. She removes her make-up and strips to her underwear, becoming a “naked subject”, the “silenced other” of the biopower that reduces her to a “frustration that cannot be reenacted”. Indeed, her gaze is now exposed, her flesh looks pallid – contrasting the vinyl’s shiny lustre –, her body is normal or it is the “non-normal” of an identity that is yet to be recognized.

Bachzetsis selects a series of actions that allow us to think how subjectivity is shaped through the prism of experience and the symbolizations that construct her. She poses sensually as a pop glam celebrity, she appears as an alter ego of the hermaphroditic Michael Jackson, she moves as a detached post-modern dancer (physically undefined since she is not characterized by gender roles). Ultimately, through these actions she reconnects the female to the bodily, biologically engendered reality of woman. She rejects the division of the experiential and the symbolic and she also implies that identity itself functions as a set of disguises/stances that the individual uses and interacts with, thus redefining his/her way of being. It is to this effect that this fluidity is easily traced in the transition from the post-modern, genderless movement material, to the obviously masculine zeibekiko folk dance. The performer is not just supporting a stance whose appearance and movement matches this particular dance form. She is not attempting to find her place in this dance by translating the male sensation to a “bad copy”. On the contrary it is through “imitation” (mimesis) that she manages to regain the depictions and representations of woman in the same way that they have been misappropriated by civilization, dance, and she attaches to them an evidently personal, idiosyncratic aspect.

Consequently, the song “The fishnet” («Το δίχτυ») that she sings at the end of the performance signifies this primal loss of the completeness of the self, the “constitutional trauma” of our subjectivity. This event causes an irreversible loss but it does not cause anymore that unutterable sadness found in psychoanalytic theories. This is a statement that supports and leads to a political reevaluation of sentimentality. In other words, she becomes this particular subject that remains captured for years in the fishnet and now she finally longs for and looks after her destiny. The first step seems to be this sole desire; and only through this freedom of self-actualization – the escape from predetermined roles – the otherness can fully emerge. As it does when Bachzetsis interprets the song by exposing her more real side: in being “the woman of herself”.

Alexandra Bachzetsis is a choreographer and visual artist based in Switzerland. Her work focuses on the interaction between dance, performance, visual arts, and theatre. Her piece *Private: Wear a mask when you talk to me* was performed at Radio Athènes, on the 23rd of May 2016.

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